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Sasha Torres: Black, White, and in Color

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Introduction

THE VICISSITUDES OF THE STEREOTYPE

SCHOLARLY ACCOUNTS of racial representation in American television have been dominated by the conceptual category of the “stereotype.” A good example—though one might cite many others—of this tendency is Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow’s collection, *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*, which treats many aspects of mass-mediated culture and contains several sections on television.¹ In the general theoretical introduction to the volume, Dates and Barlow trace a number of African American stereotypes back to their historical origins in antebellum popular culture, arguing that the versions persisting in contemporary commercial culture may be meaningfully linked to these origins in minstrelsy. For Dates and Barlow, widely circulated stereotypes such as the comic Negro, the Jim Crow figure, the pickaninny, the tragic mulatto, and the Aunt Jemima are perpetuated by whites in an effort to secure and maintain cultural power. The history of African American mass-mediated representation, then, is the history of a “split image,” in which “the dominant trend in African American portraiture has been created and nurtured by succeeding generations of white image makers, beginning as far back as the colonial era,” while “[i]ts opposite has been created and maintained by black image makers in response to the omissions and distortions of the former.”² The intellectual and political purchase of accounts like Dates and Barlow’s is considerable for a number of reasons. The stability of the white oppressor/black victim binary is always tempting, and often accurate. In addition, such readings have historically been successful in organizing aggrieved collectivities of (usually middle-class) African American spectators into counterpublics, as in the NAACP’s campaign against the television version of *Amos ‘n’ Andy*.³ Finally, these accounts are extremely efficient at replacing the pain of outrage and indignation with the pleasures of thinking “I know what that means.”⁴

But the cost of these gains is rather high. First, these accounts leave little room for the complex, and often resistant, spectatorship engendered by the sheer egregiousness of such stereotypes, or for the creative and unpredictable cultural work it does. The NAACP’s fifteen-year campaign against *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, for example, could not prevent a young Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and his black community in Piedmont,

West Virginia, from “loving” the show. In his memoir, *Colored People*, Gates recalls,

everybody loved *Amos ‘n’ Andy*—I don’t care what people say today. For the colored people, the day they took *Amos ‘n’ Andy* off the air was one of the saddest days in Piedmont. . . .

What was special to us about *Amos ‘n’ Andy* was that their world was *all* colored, just like ours. Of course, *they* had their colored judges and lawyers and doctors and nurses, which we could only dream about having, or becoming—and we *did* dream about those things.⁵

While *Amos ‘n’ Andy* was inspiring dreams of becoming a doctor or lawyer in Piedmont, elsewhere in the segregated South it was giving the girl who would become bell hooks some of her early training in cultural criticism. She writes,

a poor black family, like the one I was raised in, might sit around watching *Amos ‘n’ Andy*—enjoying it as we simultaneously critiqued it—talking about the ways this cultural production served the interests of white supremacy. We knew we were not watching representations of ourselves created by black artists or progressive white folks. Within the context of an apartheid social structure where practically every aspect of black life was determined by the efforts of those in power to maintain white supremacy, black folks were incredibly vigilant. . . . Watching television in the fifties and sixties, and listening to adult conversation, was one of the primary ways young black folks learned about race politics.⁶

Note that hooks’s account focuses not on the stereotypes themselves, but on the interpretive community they generated, and the useful political effects of that interpretive work. Such effects are poorly explained by a reading practice that has exactly one trick up its sleeve.

Second, the scholarly focus on the stereotype tends to flatten its textual objects to such an extent it almost always under-reads the complexities of even the most stereotypical texts. Consider as an example an episode of *Beulah* (ABC, 1950–53), in which black maid Beulah (Louise Beavers) has somehow gotten the (mistaken, but that pretty much goes without saying on *Beulah*) idea that her white employer, to whom she refers as “Miss Alice,” is pregnant. She passes this “information” on to Alice’s husband, “Mr. Harry,” who promptly begins dreaming of the new arrival. As he and Beulah’s boyfriend, the hapless handyman Bill, are hanging outdoor lanterns for a picnic, they exchange the following lines of dialogue:

BILL: “Anything else you’d like me to hang up, Mr. HARRY?”

HARRY: “A little boy with Donny’s smile or a little girl with blonde curls.”

BILL: “Huh?”

While the bizarre allusion to lynching here, and to the lynching of a suburban white child at that, does nothing to mitigate the organizing racism of *Beulah* in general or this episode in particular, surely we can at least agree that something complicated is going on here. Is the text allowing itself to imagine, surreptitiously and fleetingly, deadly and racially coded violence against its own idealized whiteness? Regardless of how we read this moment, this is not the kind of textual detail likely to be spotted under the coarse lens of “the stereotype” or the “negative image.”

Third, such analytical approaches under-read as well the complex relationships between texts deploying stereotypes and the televisual fields that surround them. Such fields, organized by flow, genre, and historical moment, or what Robert Deming has called “the viewer’s television archives,” may tend either to support or to challenge stereotypes.⁷ Recall, for example, the first season of CBS’s *Survivor*. *Survivor*, with its “tribes,” “talismans,” and “idols,” is always organized by the most transparently racist and ethnocentric tropes; that first season, to boot, was populated by African Americans who either couldn’t work (Ramona) or couldn’t swim (Gervase), and by a winner (Richard) who, despite being gay, managed to market himself, through his unapologetic emphasis on “playing the game,” as the perfect corporate white guy. But these effects were complicated, that summer, by the Reebok ads that punctuated the program throughout its run. Featuring two geeky, twentysomething white guys in *Survivor*-inspired situations, these ads ironized Richard’s game-playing. Their characters played the game *badly*, continually and unnecessarily adopting the most extreme and foolhardy approaches to “surviving,” only to have their stupidity pointed out to them by well-meaning (and Reebok-clad) passersby, usually women and/or persons of color. If another Richard, Richard Dyer, is correct that one of the constitutive and enduring tropes of whiteness is the white man’s conquest of the wilderness, surely these ads serve a destabilizing and unpredictable function in relation to the text of *Survivor* “proper.”⁸

Fourth, by taking what is only the most obvious form of televisual racism—the stereotype or “negative image”—as the medium’s singular or even dominant form of racial ideology, stereotype-focused accounts risk drastically under-describing other problematic representational modalities in which racial types figure marginally, if at all. Such forms are more subtle and may be just as insidious. Consider (as I will throughout this book), for example, the long tradition, from Nat King Cole to André Braugher, of respectful—even deferential—depictions of the exemplary Negro, depictions whose positive effects for white hegemony may outweigh their effects among blacks as “positive images.”⁹ Consider as

well the documentary gaze, from Edward R. Murrow's *Harvest of Shame* to Bill Moyers's *The Crisis in the Black Family*, which fetishizes "accuracy" while gaping ethnographically at its black Others.¹⁰ And consider the consistent reduction of mass black politics, from the March on Washington to the Million Man March, to their implications for whites or their potential for "unrest."¹¹

Fifth, and finally, prevailing descriptions of the relations between African Americans and television, like Dates and Barlow's, in which powerful white opinion leaders slander passive blacks, are inadequate to explain these modalities and the overdetermined industrial conditions and social relations that produce them. Because they rest on the assumption that racial stereotypes invented "as far back as the colonial era" have persisted pretty much unchanged, they rest as well on the denial that television, as an historically situated and technologically specific phenomenon, might both organize and be organized by similarly specific racial formations. These descriptions are inadequate, in other words, because they fail to recognize the ways in which African American persons, collectivities, and politics have collided at crucial moments in television history with industrial self-interest, cynicism, and even, on occasion, the desire to do the right thing, to produce not only the content of television's programs, but their form and reception as well. To put it more bluntly, these descriptions are inadequate because they fail to apprehend the extent to which progressive postwar racial politics and American television have nurtured, relied on, and exploited one another.

Let me give you an example.

ISSUES AND SOME ANSWERS

There are eight pieces of thirty-two-year-old correspondence in a file marked "American Broadcasting Company" among the papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., at the Archives of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta. The letters chronicle the attempts, starting late in 1967, by *Issues and Answers* producer Peggy Whedon to book King as a guest on her series. Prompted, apparently, by news of the upcoming Poor People's Campaign, Whedon wrote to King on December 5: "It has been far too long since you have been with us on ISSUES AND ANSWERS, and we would like to plan towards a program with you for the time in April when you start your plan of civil disobedience in Washington, D.C." Hoping to entice the ever-overscheduled King, Whedon promised that "ISSUES AND ANSWERS offers the ideal format and best TV time slot for a presentation by you to the American people."¹²

King's secretary at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Dora McDonald, replied to Whedon on January 11, 1968: "Dr. King asked me to write to say that it will be possible for him to appear on *Issues and Answers* on Sunday, February 11, 1968. In keeping with the telephone conversation we had recently, he will not appear on any similar program at least thirty days before or after your engagement."¹³ But King's schedule and the network's conflicted: ABC would preempt *Issues and Answers* on February 11 in favor of its telecast of the Winter Olympics from Grenoble. Could King, Whedon asked in her January 22 letter to McDonald, appear on Sunday, March 24?¹⁴ No, McDonald replied, he was already scheduled to appear on *Face the Nation* that day.¹⁵

Undaunted, Whedon wrote back on February 13, again pitching the potential program's efficacy for both ABC and the civil rights cause:

Since we cannot confirm a March date with Doctor King for a guest appearance on "Issues and Answers", I'd like to suggest a late April appearance after the Washington demonstrations. This would probably involve a summary of what had been accomplished and a look ahead to the summer.

We shall wait to hear from you as to a good Sunday . . . , a Sunday that would have a strong impact on audiences and on news stories. Since the program is carried in every large city in the United States, let's find a Sunday that would be mutually effective and important. Would April 28th be a good date?¹⁶

April 28th was not a good date. Murdered on April 4th, King would be by then relegated posthumously to television genres other than Sunday afternoon public affairs programming: catastrophe coverage (news of the assassination and its aftermath), media event (the funeral), and, eventually, liberal documentary retrospective and public service announcement.¹⁷

I cite this correspondence here as evidence of the complex relations of power at work in the relationship between the industry and the movement. Note, for example, that Whedon approaches King, not the other way around. Note the frankness with which she pitches *Issues and Answers*—with its "ideal format," "best TV time slot," and address to "every large city in the United States"—as a publicity vehicle for the campaign. And note how her emphasis on the "mutuality" of interest between ABC's program and King's movement constitutes a near-admission that each will be using the other for particular kinds of gain: while King and the campaign will benefit from national exposure, ABC will get exclusive access to King, at least for thirty days, and "a strong impact on audiences and on news stories."

A darling of the press since the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King en-

joyed media access that was unique among movement activists. In 1968 he would have been particularly sought after by television producers, despite his opposition to the Vietnam War and his shift to the Left on economic issues, as a “moderate” with respect to race relations. But if King—as a “reasonable” black leader with immense telegenicity—constituted for people like Whedon the prize on which they always had their eyes, I would argue that this had as much to do with a historical alliance between television and the civil rights movement as with King’s singular televisual luminosity. The first two chapters of this book chart the early years of this alliance, which emerges in the wake of the lynching of Emmett Till and continues at least until 1965.

There was much more connecting civil rights with television than the temporal coincidence between the rapid expansion of the southern movement and the similar growth in television’s penetration and profits. One of the central arguments of *Black, White, and In Color* is that from 1955 to 1965, both the civil rights movement and the television industry shared the urgent desire to forge a new, and newly *national*, consensus on the meanings and functions of racial difference. For its part, the southern movement’s most consistent and effective gesture against segregation was to contrast the racial terrorism of the South with national ideals and democratic discourses. At exactly the same moment, television was becoming a national medium. The continued expansion of the industry’s profits thus depended on its ability to exploit in programming the visibility and topicality of race across sectional borders. This in turn required a newly *national* consensus on the range of race’s possible meanings, one that could spare networks the ire of southern affiliates, who were, from the perspective of the New York-based corporations, out of step with the rest of the country with respect to racial representation. Television and the civil rights movement, then, through a perhaps unlikely coincidence of interests, formed powerful allies for each other during this period.

In my view, the intertwining of network and movement has enormous consequences for our understanding both of TV history and African American televisual representation. With respect to TV history, if the picture I paint in the first and second chapters is an accurate one, then many of telejournalism’s conventions and procedures were established in crucial relation to the various imperatives to represent African American persons, collectivities, and political struggles at work during the period. In other words, if the conventions adopted in the early years of television news were organized to a great extent by the genre’s encounter with the movement, and if news departments were crucial to the networks’ self-understandings, then we find race squarely at the center of affiliate relations, industrial institution-building, and generic formation. If television historians of the late 1950s and early 1960s were

really to take this fact on board, our understanding of the period would in my view shift both enormously and unpredictably.

With respect to black televisuality, to claim that televisual racial representation in information genres was dominated by images of the civil rights movement in the late '50s and early '60s is not to claim that stereotypical representation in other genres was eradicated or even came temporarily to a screeching halt during the period. It is rather to note that such representation existed alongside representations of many of the most forceful and articulate African Americans that the nation has known, and to suggest that these sets of representations might fruitfully be read *in relation to* one another.¹⁸ It is to propose, in other words, that it is in the generic interplay between “information” and “entertainment,” that something like *Amos 'n' Andy* (produced in 1951–53, but widely available in syndication until 1966) can be understood.

The first two chapters of *Black, White, and In Color* offer interrelated arguments in support of my claims for movement/network cooperation during the years from 1955 to 1965. Chapter 1, “‘In a crisis we must have a sense of drama’: Civil Rights and Televisual Information,” considers the relationship between television information programming and the Southern civil rights movement, especially SCLC and the pre-black power Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Drawing upon archival documents, histories of journalism and of the movement, and the memoirs of both journalists and television information workers, I examine first what the movement meant to telejournalists and then what telejournalists meant for the movement, unraveling the knot of overlapping and common interest in which each was joined to the other.

In the second chapter, “The Double Life of ‘Sit-In,’” I recapitulate the movement described in the first, pursuing similar questions by focusing on a single text. Because the NBC documentary “Sit-In,” which aired December 20, 1960, came at the beginning of a “boom” in network documentary production, it has much to teach us about what network news organizations hoped to accomplish with such films. Through close reading of the documentary’s narrative structure and deployment of the figure of Chet Huntley, I argue that civil rights representation like “Sit-In” was an important mechanism for establishing the objective *gravitas* of telejournalism at an early moment in its history, even as the documentary was at pains to present the gains of the Nashville movement as inevitable. In the second part of the chapter, I discuss the movement’s use of “Sit-In” during the early 1960s as a recruitment and training film in civil disobedience. Since “Sit-In” was an important text within the civil rights movement, it affords us some insight into the reception practices that greeted civil rights representation among progressive blacks.

Coverage of the events at Little Rock, Birmingham, and Selma are

clearly the most important texts of civil rights television for both the medium and the movement. As many have argued (more on this in chapter 1), Little Rock granted television news a new seriousness, which was deepened in the coverage of Birmingham and Selma. And there is wide consensus that Birmingham and Selma contributed considerably to the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights act, respectively. These televisual moments are linked not just by the power of their impact, but also by a specific element of their content: the intersection of African American bodies and the violent tactics of southern police. Central to the movement strategy of calling southern institutions to account for racism in full view of the entire nation was the historically slippery relation between official and unofficial enforcement of Jim Crow. As any serious history of the Ku Klux Klan will establish, the official agents of the state charged with maintaining segregation had, since Reconstruction, been closely allied with white racial terrorists of the unofficial kind; many were themselves Klan members.¹⁹ The quite-reliable tendency of southern police to privilege local custom over federal law both fascinated and appalled northern news workers; their film became visible evidence for the movement in its case against the South. In this respect, the first two chapters of *Black, White, and In Color* constitute the first half of a diptych representing two moments in the recent history of relations among television, blacks, and law enforcement: 1955–1965 and the 1990s. As a diptych, the book as a whole interrogates the shifting relations of televised law enforcement to conservative racial projects.

TELEVISION AND CONSERVATIVE RACIAL PROJECTS AFTER THE '60S

Black, White, and In Color treats both race and policing as phenomena that change over time. It is interested both in certain thematic, generic, and representational holdovers from the first moment it treats to the second, and in the historical specificity of those moments. Here I will propose an account of the specificities of the second, paying particular, albeit brief, attention to the reconstitution of conservative racial ideology and practices in the wake of the civil rights era, and the centrality of television to their institutionalization during the Reagan-Bush years.

A full exposition of the history of racial politics and meanings for the past thirty-odd years is obviously beyond the scope of this book. But it is worth summarizing briefly the major forms that reaction against African American civil rights gains has taken during this period. First, I should note that at least one of these gains has not been overturned: it is no longer possible, in mainstream American national culture, to appear

to be against racial equality. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant write, “In the aftermath of the 1960s, any effective challenge to the egalitarian ideals framed by the minority movements could no longer rely on the racism of the past. Racial equality had to be acknowledged as a desirable goal.”²⁰ Television scholar Herman Gray concurs: “Even when blackness functioned as the chief icon against which conservative Republicans ran for political office, it was important for them not to appear racist.”²¹ So the politics of racial reaction are first and foremost a politics of euphemism and recoding. We might think of Nixon’s call to “law and order” on behalf of an (implicitly white) “silent majority” as an inaugural example of such euphemism in the post-civil rights era.²²

Since the mid-1970s, these new right and neoconservative recodings have been organized around a central reversal: the doctrine that, in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s words, “singles out race-specific civil rights policies as one of the most significant threats to the democratic political system.” She goes on:

Emphasizing the need for strictly color-blind policies, this view calls for the repeal of affirmative action and other race-specific remedial policies, urges an end to class-based remedies, and calls for the administration to limit remedies to what it calls “actual victims” of discrimination.²³

By calling race consciousness *per se* antidemocratic, the Right accomplished several tasks at once. First, this discursive shift supported one of their most important objectives: to stop in its tracks the long-term efforts of the legal arm of the NAACP to seek meaningful legal equality for African Americans through the courts.²⁴ Conservative legal scholars used their equation of color-blindness with democracy to urge the courts to emphasize “equality of process” for blacks—rather than “equality of result,” as the NAACP had tried to do. Briefly, “equality of result” seeks to end African American subordination and asks the courts to serve the national interest by eliminating its effects. “Equality of process,” on the other hand, envisions such subordination as isolated acts against individuals and “seeks,” in Crenshaw’s words, “to proscribe only certain kinds of subordinating acts, and then only when other interests are not overburdened.” Conservative arguments against “equality of result” proved effective at hobbling racial minorities as they sought legal redress for discrimination.²⁵

In addition, figuring race consciousness as a threat to democracy helped the Right to disseminate the notion of “reverse discrimination” by people of color against law-abiding middle-class white male taxpayers. The notion of “reverse discrimination,” in turn, helped conservatives render discursively acceptable their systematic attacks both on people of color and the poor, who were now redefined, post-“War on

Poverty,” as a national problem of a different sort. The poor in general and the black poor in particular were now, in Herman Gray’s words, “distinguished by sedation and satisfaction of bodily pleasures, dependency, immorality, hostility, erosion of standards, loss of civic responsibility, and lack of respect for traditional values,” and thus as “undeserving” of national concern.²⁶ Their demands, and those of their “liberal” allies, on the welfare state were now depicted as greedy and illegitimate claims to too-large slices of a shrinking national pie to which white taxpayers had too little access.

Finally, the Right’s attack on race-conscious social policies allowed it to reposition whiteness as victim rather than victimizer. And, like the notion of “reverse discrimination,” this move managed, according to Gray, “to take away from blacks the moral authority . . . won in the civil rights movement.”²⁷ As I argue in chapter 1, it was precisely the moral authority of the movement that provided the underpinning for its alliance with television, insofar as this authority was made manifest by “bearing the cross” both of racial injustice and of what José Muñoz has called “the burden of liveness.” In the context of the southern civil rights movement, bearing “the burden of liveness” required movement workers to produce arresting televisual images juxtaposing peaceful protest with physical suffering at the hands of violent segregationists.²⁸ Given this representational history, which so dramatically supported the equation of whiteness with vicious self-interest, the conservative effort to displace moral authority with respect to racial justice from blacks to whites required new kinds of televised racial representation.

The chief mechanism for this displacement during the 1980s was television news. If, as Gray argues convincingly, “blackness was constructed along a continuum ranging from menace on one end to immorality on the other, with irresponsibility located somewhere in the middle,” this trope was disseminated through a nightly representational flood of “black male gang members, black male criminality, crumbling black families, black welfare cheats, black female crack users, and black teen pregnancy.”²⁹ He sums up this process this way:

Throughout the Reagan/Bush 1980s, commercial network television news programs brought us more and more people, mostly blacks and latinos, who seemed beyond the reasonable comprehension of [the] popular common sense of public and civic responsibility, except as deviants, dependents and threats. If television news was to be believed, these mostly black and brown people seemed to commit more crime, have more babies, use more drugs, and be more incompetent with respect to individual and civic responsibility.³⁰

Television news in the 1980s, then, participated actively in the new construction of black criminality, addiction, and irresponsibility.³¹ In the process, it helped undergird a national shift in the understanding of

blackness that certainly eased the accomplishment of the Reaganite racial agenda at the level of public policy and discourse. And these shifts toward a more conservative understanding of racial movements has been remarkably durable. It is the second major argument of this book that 1990s television representing law and criminality proved eerily effective at continuing the criminalization of blackness that was the central racial project of television news of the '80s.³²

"Law and order" programming of the 1990s, then, is the other picture in *Black, White, and In Color's* diptych examining race and policing. During the civil rights years, the alliance between news workers and the movement produced a particular set of coded identifications linking disparate televisual information texts: television asked its viewers, black and white, to identify *with* nonviolent black protest and *against* the violent representatives of the southern state. By the early 1990s, though, television was asking its viewers to perform identifications that are precisely the opposite of those we find in the earlier period, to identify *against* blacks, who are now generally associated with criminality, and *with* the state power of the police. This dramatic shift suggests not only the durability of post-civil rights era conservatism with respect to race, but also the necessity that those on the Left refocus our attention on policing as one of the most important ways in which racial struggle is now being waged. Indeed, the excesses of contemporary policing in U.S. urban centers seem increasingly to be where the incompleteness of the American civil rights project is most visible. It is certainly ironic that the movement's highly publicized and strategically successful encounters with Southern law enforcement personalities like Birmingham's Bull Connor and Selma's Jim Clark—encounters explicitly staged for television—have yielded in the contemporary moment to contests with police racism and corruption that seem to have little if any political efficacy, and that are merely fodder for television's docudramatic fictionalization. It's my hope that the juxtaposition of circumstances, representations, and arguments in the two parts of this book will suggest why we need so badly, right now, to wrench our public discussions of policing out of the realm of televised fiction.

Chapters 3 and 4 interrogate the widespread tendency for "liveness" or its traces to serve as a sign of televisual blackness. In chapter 1, I establish the contexts for some of the informational tropes of liveness or quasi-liveness that come to dominate civil rights representation's mediation of African American persons, politics, and collectivities. It is the latter-day versions of these tropes—the persistent association of what Phillip Brian Harper has called "mimetic realism" with black subjects and their representation—that mobilize the depictions I discuss in the book's second half.³³

In chapter 3, I read a group of texts, each treating in some form the

beating of Rodney King by LAPD officers and its aftermath. I examine how “liveness,” which Jane Feuer and others have identified as the organizing ideology of television, served also as the ideology organizing the public understanding of the historical events comprising the beating and what followed.³⁴ Through a reading of *L.A. Law* and *Doogie Howser, M.D.*’s treatment of the uprisings following the Simi Valley verdict, I trace how fictional televisual forms appropriate liveness for their own purposes, thus representing (perhaps inadvertently) a struggle among televisual forms to represent the nation. And I consider how race figures into network television’s self-understanding during this period.

In chapter 4, I examine *Brooklyn South*’s versions of the torture of Abner Louima. If chapter 3 focuses chiefly on how collisions between police brutality and televisual representation force revisions to the medium’s understanding of its social functions, economic viability, and forms of address, here I am concerned with the question of how cultural representation can aid in the project of abridging civil rights. Against the backdrop of “Giuliani Time,” the mayoral administration of Rudolph Giuliani, I ask whether the cop show, as a genre, can ease the implementation of a political program of “law and order” that is broadly racist and classist in its effects.

Chapter 5 serves as a kind of conclusion to *Black, White, and In Color*. Here I try to pull back from the specific texts and historical contexts encountered in earlier chapters to consider the relation between television and African American political and social aspiration more broadly. In particular, I consider the usefulness of the widespread tendency, among African American cultural and political leaders, to equate access to television with access to power. I hope to trouble this equation by noting that television’s “positive images” of black “civil rights subjects” are always paired with, and thus counteracted by, negative ones, which I call the subject of civil rights undone: that television representation for blacks, and particularly for black men, has a troubling tendency to slide into forms of surveillance or ethnography; and that the historical inaccessibility of television as a space for black women’s self-representation severely undermines the medium’s potential as a vehicle for black political possibility.